



Morning Alert - Friday, February 24, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK and TBS gave top play to reports on strained relations between Malaysia and North Korea over the murder of Kim Jong Nam. TV Asahi also carried updates on the incident. Other top news included a report on a new novel by Haruki Murakami that was released on Thursday.

Main front-page items in national dailies included updates on Kim Jong Nam's murder, Nissan's announcement that CEO Carlos Ghosn will relinquish his post and become chairman on April 1, and the likely enactment of legislation mandating political parties to make efforts to field an equal number of male and female candidates in national and local elections.

INTERNATIONAL

New White House security chief says ties with Japan "important"

Yomiuri ran a prominent inside-page story on Lt. Gen. McMaster, who recently assumed the post of national security advisor for President Trump, highlighting his remarks made over the phone to Secretary General Yachi of the National Security Secretariat on Tuesday that Japan is an important ally. The Abe administration welcomed the request for the teleconference from the U.S. side as a demonstration of McMaster's intention to continue to attach importance to Tokyo. While noting that the Army general apparently has little expertise in Asia as he has been involved in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the daily said he is set to adhere to President Trump's policy of deepening engagement with Asia. The paper took up the general's speech last May in which he strongly criticized Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea.

Abe may have given Australian leader advice on how to deal with President Trump

Yomiuri wrote that Prime Minister Abe spoke by phone with his Australian counterpart Turnbull soon after meeting with President Trump in mid-February. The paper speculated that the Japanese leader may have offered Turnbull advice on how to communicate with the U.S. leader given that the teleconference between the President and Turnbull on Jan. 28 abruptly ended on account of tension related to an immigration-related issue, while Abe successfully established a good rapport with the President. The teleconference between Abe and Turnbull was reportedly arranged at Canberra's request.

U.S., Japan, ROK to discuss North Korea

Yomiuri reported that the chief representatives to the Six-Party Talks from Japan, the United States, and South Korea will hold talks in Washington on Feb. 27 in order to discuss issues related to North Korea, including the recent assassination of Kim Jong Nam in Kuala Lumpur. This will be the first meeting of its kind under the Trump administration.

In a related story, Mainichi wrote that the GOJ plans to introduce through the Vienna-based Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) a mobile platform designed to detect radioactive gas emitted when nuclear tests are conducted, explaining that the equipment will be installed somewhere in northern Japan this year for a two-year period to prepare for the possibility of a nuclear test by North Korea. Similar equipment has already been set up by the CTBTO at two locations in Gunma and Okinawa.

ROK takes step toward removing statue in Busan

All papers reported on a letter sent earlier this month by South Korean Foreign Minister Yun to municipal authorities in Busan asking them to relocate a comfort woman statue that was erected in front of the Japanese Consulate General there. However, the GOJ reportedly considers the move to be insufficient, with Nikkei quoting an unnamed senior MOFA official as saying: "Sending a letter alone does not constitute a solution." Sankei said the GOJ is determined not to allow Ambassador Nagamine to return to his post in Seoul unless more concrete measures are taken by the ROK government to remove the Busan memorial.

China steps up operations around Senkakus

Sankei gave top play to the disclosure by several GOJ sources that the number of Chinese government vessels regularly deployed in the vicinity of the Senkakus has increased from three to four since last fall, conjecturing that the move represents Beijing's intent to assert its territorial claims to the disputed outcrops more aggressively. The GOJ is alarmed by China's stepped-up maritime operations around the uninhabited isles. The daily underscored the need to enhance the JCG's capabilities to counter the Chinese offensive.

Abe to visit Russia in April

Mainichi claimed that arrangements are being made for Prime Minister Abe to visit Russia for talks with President Putin possibly on April 27 in order to discuss the Northern Territories dispute, including the resumed use of chartered flights for visits to the islands by former Japanese residents.

SECURITY

LDP officials discuss missile defense

Most papers wrote that an LDP taskforce on missile defense held its first meeting on Thursday with the goal of putting together recommendations for submission to the Abe administration by the end of March concerning the possible introduction of advanced missile defense systems, such as THAAD and Aegis Ashore, both of which are produced by Lockheed Martin. Asahi said some LDP lawmakers are extremely keen to procure those platforms for the SDF on account of steady progress in North Korea's ballistic missile technology. The paper noted that Tokyo's purchase of these platforms would also be in line with the Trump administration's "Buy American" policy. According to Asahi, the LDP panel will also examine the idea of possessing capabilities to strike enemy bases, as some defense hawks are suggesting the need to procure Tomahawk long-range, subsonic cruise missiles. The paper said, however, that such defense hardware would be extremely expensive, adding that the U.S. is reportedly wary about Tokyo potentially acquiring such capabilities.

U.S. military's Ospreys to conduct joint training with SDF in March

Most papers reported on a GSDF announcement on Thursday that it will conduct a joint drill with the U.S. Marine Corps at two training areas in Niigata and Gunma from March 6 through 17, noting that six Futenma-based MV-22 Ospreys and 750 Japanese and American personnel will take part. This will be the first training of its type since the U.S. and Japan agreed last September to relocate some Osprey training out of Okinawa. The Japanese side will pay for the fuel. The Ospreys will fly between Yokota AB and the two training areas during the drill.

Civic group demands U.S. Navy release results of investigation into Yokosuka mishap

Tokyo Shimbun filed a prominent article in its city news section on criticism raised by a civic group in Yokosuka against the municipal government for its failure to demand that the CNFJ provide a detailed explanation concerning an incident on Jan. 31 in which the USS Antietam ran aground and spilled hydraulic oil into waters off Yokosuka Naval Base. According to the article, although the municipal government called for an explanation of the cause of the accident and measures to prevent a recurrence, it has no intention to press the Navy to make the results public on the grounds that "it is a matter connected to the operation of ships by the U.S. Navy." The Navy authorities have reportedly said that the investigation is still "ongoing." The civic group has criticized the local authorities for not being more aggressive in demanding an explanation, saying that a serious

situation might develop if the Yokosuka-based nuclear aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan were to run aground.

